Tackling Tough Cases: How to Empower Critical Thinking and Temper Productivity Goals

By Sarah Humbert, RHIA

By the year 2020, new technological advancements are predicted to occur every 30 seconds.[1] This explosion of technology includes the healthcare industry—and with it, clinical coding.

The healthcare industry is already witnessing rapid development of cutting-edge medical procedures using disruptive technologies and processes. Most common in academic medical centers, experimental surgical procedures raise ICD-10-CM/PCS-related questions for coding professionals and their management teams. Coding professionals often are forced to choose between fully researching complex cases or cutting corners to meet productivity benchmarks.

ICD-10 affords the flexibility to code these complex cases, but it also requires that coding professionals apply critical thinking skills and that coding managers adjust productivity expectations.

The Critical Thinking Mindset

According to the World Economic Forum's report entitled "The Future of Jobs," critical thinking is listed as the number two top skill required in all areas by 2020. Encouraging coding professionals to engage their critical thinking skills is paramount when coding complex cases or new experimental procedures. According to Critical Thinking Web, a website maintained by Joe Lau, PhD, of the philosophy department at the University of Hong Kong:

> "A critical thinker is able to deduce consequences from what he knows, and he knows how to make use of information to solve problems, and to seek relevant sources of information to inform himself… Critical thinking can help us acquire knowledge, improve our theories, and strengthen arguments. We can use critical thinking to enhance work processes and improve social institutions."[2]

For coding professionals, critical thinking skills must be coupled with a solid grounding in anatomy/physiology and pharmacology. This foundation ensures coding professionals understand the entire clinical picture painted through ancillary findings and clinical documentation.

Coding professionals also benefit from having an investigator mentality and the ability to think outside the box when performing research. For example, instead of relying only on "typical" coding resources, a critical thinker may use Google to find a YouTube video of a new procedure and go to the manufacturer's website for any recommended codes suggested for the device or procedure.

Empowering Critical Thinkers

How can a coding manager identify coding professionals who possess critical thinking skills and encourage their development? The best way is to use a different coding exam—one that includes several new procedures not already explained in the coding book. Coders who aren't afraid to ask for clarification are usually the best candidates, especially if they seek input via thoughtful and referenced questions.

Generally speaking, coding candidates who don't ask for clarification tend to be more focused on productivity rather than accuracy. They tend to forego the time needed to perform research or ask questions. While the lack of questions may be an attempt to appear knowledgeable, it does not suggest a strong critical thinking mindset.

Consider the following strategies to encourage a critical thinking mindset among coding teams:

- Foster an environment of curiosity, learning, and sharing. Staff should feel comfortable asking questions with impunity.
- Routinely share knowledge of new experimental procedures, ideally once per week.
- Create a queue for secondary review holds that coding professionals can use when they have questions.
- Reach out to a coding outsourcing company for guidance on difficult cases or new procedures.
- Post questions on AHIMA message boards, or even groups on social media.

It is better for coding professionals to take time, conduct research, ask questions, and code complex cases right the first time versus repeating efforts when a claim is denied or rejected by the payer. A few extra minutes on the front end saves time and money on the back end. This is especially true for new experimental procedures. However, coding managers must factor in the additional time needed for these cases.

Resetting Productivity Expectations

Again, it is important for coding professionals working in organizations with progressive technology to have the skill set required to research the best way to code a new procedure. If professional coders are taking time to research cutting-edge medicine, how can coding managers balance productivity expectations with accuracy—while also maintaining discharged-not-final-coded goals?

A proven strategy is to flex productivity benchmarks for complex cases. Here are three tactics to consider:

1. Base coding productivity goals for complex cases on length of stay (LOS), allotting more time for records with a higher LOS.
2. Factor in total charges to accommodate for new, high-complexity surgical procedures that may have a much lower LOS than anticipated.
3. Use a combination of LOS and total charges to account for complexity in coding productivity standards.

As medical technology continues to advance, coding professionals will be pushed to code complex, new, and experimental cases. The critical thinking mindset, combined with flexibility in productivity expectations, ensures coding professionals and managers collaborate to tackle new horizons and learn new skills that advance the coding profession.

Notes

1. The Emerging Future. “Disruptive Technology Riding the Emerging Wave of the Future.” www.theemergingfuture.com/disruptive-technology.htm.
2. Lau, Joe. “[C01] What is critical thinking?” Critical Thinking Web. http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/ct.php.

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